

An Empty Life? (8): The Emptiness of Life Without God

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If you have your Bibles, I'd like to invite you to turn with me to Ecclesiastes, chapter 6, as we continue our way in this book. This is a book about satisfaction, about meaning in life, about fulfillment, about fullness, about significance, about happiness and blessedness. Now, you're thinking to yourself, "Hmmm, those aren't the words that struck me as I've been meditating on this book over the last five weeks or so because it's so often a bleak book. And book that starts out with "Vanity of vanities, all is vanities" is not one of those books that you're expecting to be an upbeat, optimistic look at the world.

But actually, this book is precisely about meaning and fulfillment and fullness and significance and satisfaction and happiness and blessedness in life. And the very reason why the author, why the Preacher, why Solomon begins by saying, "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity." The he begins by saying, "Emptiness, emptiness, everything is empty. Futility of futilities, everything is futile. The reason he begins this book that way is because he wants you to find true satisfaction, true significance, true happiness, true blessedness, true meaning in life, fulfillment and fullness. He wants you to find those things. It's very important to realize that. The following of Christ does not mean the abdication of happiness and blessedness. But doesn't Jesus say, "Take up your cross and deny yourself. Die to yourself. Follow me." Yes, He does and that is very important, but it's not because He is saying happiness and blessedness and satisfaction and significance and meaning and fullness are not to be the experience of His followers, nor are to be desired by His followers. This Book of Ecclesiastes makes it clear that every man desires significance and satisfaction and fullness and meaning in life. The problem is people seek it the wrong way and people seek for it in the wrong things. And so, the Preacher begins this book by saying that everything is vain, everything is empty, everything is futile, everything is meaningless; there is no satisfaction under the sun not because the desire for meaning in this life is wrong, but because so many seek meaning in this life in the wrong places and in the wrong way. His desire is to cut off from you every wrong path to meaning and satisfaction, *not* so that you will live as meaningless life as possible but so that you would experience *true* fullness.

You see, there are two problems that necessitate the Preacher taking this tact. The first is there are so many people involved in the quest for meaning and

looking for it in the wrong places, and he's got to show them how they'll never find meaning in those wrong places. But the other problem is people seeking meaning in the wrong places and finding in this life a tremendous level of contentment, to the point that if they don't think, they are perfectly happy like they are, when in fact, they are not experiencing true meaning and satisfaction and blessedness; they are experiencing a false substitute.

And so, he has to hold up before us the ultimate failure of those false substitutes before we can realize that we have bought into a shallow happiness that won't last as opposed to the deep happiness that can weather every storm of life. So far in the first five chapters, we've seen him try and cut off false escape routes into meaning and happiness. We've seen him in chapter one take the way of wisdom. "I'm going to reflect about life; I'm going to think about it deeply. I'm going to come up with a philosophy of life which will give it meaning apart from God." And he says, "No, you won't." And when that fails, he looks at the escape route of pleasure. And we saw that in chapter one and two. "OK, if I can't *think* my way into meaning, I'll at least have a good time on my way to satisfaction. I'll have fun." And he says, "That way won't work either." And then there's the way of work. The last time we were together, we looked at the way of affluence—having lots of money and things.

And he says, "Each of those ways to happiness, blessedness, meaning, fullness, fulfillment, satisfaction, is a dead end." Each of those ways cannot, in and of themselves, provide satisfaction in this life. Only *God* can provide satisfaction. The only positive answer he has given to us so far is in asking us to look squarely at the providing hand of God. That's where meaning comes from. Well, this chapter that we are going to read today is really rehearsing and summarizing some of the ways that people try to find meaning and happiness in this life and again, cutting us off from those as escape routes and pointing us again to the only One who can provide true meaning, happiness and blessedness in this life. So, let's hear God's word in Ecclesiastes, chapter 6, beginning in the first verse.

There is an evil which I have seen under the sun and it is prevalent among men-- a man to whom God has given riches and wealth and honor so that his soul lacks nothing of all that he desires; yet God has not empowered him to eat from them, for a foreigner enjoys them. This is vanity and a severe affliction. If a man fathers a hundred children and lives many years, however many they be, but his soul is not satisfied with good things and he does not even have a proper burial, then I say, "Better the miscarriage than he, for it comes in futility and goes into obscurity; and its name is covered in obscurity. "It never sees the sun and it never knows anything; it is better off than he. "Even if the other man lives a thousand years twice and does not enjoy good things--do not all go to one place?" All a man's labor is for his mouth and yet the appetite is not satisfied. For what advantage does the wise man have over the fool? What advantage does the poor man have, knowing how to walk before the living? What the eyes

see is better than what the soul desires. This too is futility and a striving after wind. Whatever exists has already been named, and it is known what man is; for he cannot dispute with him who is stronger than he is. For there are many words which increase futility. What then is the advantage to a man? For who knows what is good for a man during his lifetime, during the few years of his futile life? He will spend them like a shadow. For who can tell a man what will be after him under the sun?

Amen. This is God's Word; may He add His blessing to it. Let's pray.

Lord, unveil our own hearts and desires to ourselves as we sit under Your word. Show us the idols; show us the things that we desire more than You. Show us the things that we desire instead of You. If we are apart from You, show us our deepest unhappiness; an unhappiness that can only be answered by Your Word, Yourself. Make then Your Word a skillful surgeon to our hearts, and Your Spirit to grant us new life as we see our poverty and need, and see the only hope of the fulfillment of that poverty and need in Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

This is a book about the search for satisfaction, the search for significance, the search for happiness or blessedness or meaning or fullness, and fulfillment. That reminds us that those things are not wrong in themselves though they are often pursued wrongly. There are self-centered people who think only of themselves, only of their happiness, and they don't care about anyone else as long as they obtain happiness. That's clearly something that is judged and censured by the Holy Scriptures, but God has built into us a heart for eternity. Eternity has been placed in our hearts. We realize that we are made for something more, and so we are all on a quest for meaning and happiness and blessedness. The problem is we often pursue it wrongly and we seek the source of happiness and blessedness and satisfaction in the wrong thing apart from a saving relationship with God through Jesus Christ. And the author of Ecclesiastes, the Preacher Solomon, is here to cut us off from the various escape routes of meaninglessness in life. For, when we pause, if we are living without God, no matter what satisfaction we are experiencing, we will realize that it does not answer our deepest need. And so, he is bringing up before us the emptiness of our meaning and happiness apart from God in every quadrant that we experience it. And we see several of these in the passage that is before us today.

I. God has not built life for anything apart from Him to satisfy.

In verses 1-6, we see that nothing in this life, apart from God, can satisfy us because God has not built life for anything, apart from Him, to satisfy us. He explores five escape routes in this passage. In verses one and two, he goes right back to riches. We were looking at this last time in Ecclesiastes, chapter 5. He says that riches alone will fail to satisfy, and he gives one case in point. Look at

verse 1 and 2. "A man whom God has given riches and wealth and honor so that his soul lacks nothing at all that he desires, and yet God does not empower him to eat from them." He tells this story of a man who has worked really hard; he's made a lot of money and he's gotten what he desired in the scope of his vocation and yet, he dies, doesn't experience it and somebody else enjoys the fruit of his labor. Now you say to the author of Ecclesiastes, "Look, you are the consummate pessimist. I know lots of wealthy people whom that is not the case with. They work hard and make a lot of money and they enjoy it." And his response is, "My point is not that this happens every time. My point is it not only happens, it happens often, that people invest themselves in gaining riches and wealth and they themselves don't end up enjoying them one way or the other. It's not that some of them die and don't enjoy them; it's that some of them live and don't enjoy them." He has already said that wealth and the enjoyment of wealth are two different things. Being able to enjoy the wealth that God has given is a gift from God. Just because you have wealth doesn't mean that you can truly enjoy it. He not only distinguishes wealth and the enjoyment of wealth, he distinguishes wealth, the enjoyment of wealth, and true satisfaction. Those are three different things. And so he is saying that I'm telling you that is always this way; I'm a pessimist.

Perhaps you remember the Far Side cartoon describing the four basic personalities? "Hey, the glass is half empty." "Hey, the glass is half full." "Hey, half empty; half full--half empty; half full." And finally. "Hey, I ordered a cheeseburger." The Preacher is not the guy who is saying that the glass is half empty. The Preacher is not just someone who sees the worst part of life; that life is as rotten as it can possibly be. He's simply saying, "The fact of the matter is that as I look around me, I see people with riches and they do not have satisfaction. Therefore, satisfaction must not come from riches." He's saying *that if it ever* fails to bring satisfaction, and he's saying it always does fail in and of itself to bring satisfaction, *then* riches cannot be the source of satisfaction.

Secondly, look at verses 3-6. He says that family, lots of children and a long life--these things cannot satisfy. If a man fathers a hundred children and lives many years, however many they may be, but his soul is not satisfied with good things and he doesn't have a proper burial; this is vanity. He paints a picture of a man who lives a long life. He has lots of children and grandchildren, but at the end of his life his children turn their back on him and he doesn't even have a proper burial. And again, you say, "You are the ultimate pessimist, Solomon. I know lots of people who have lots of kids and grandkids; they have a great relationship with the children and they love and delight in their family. They take great satisfaction." And he says for you to look around you and you look at people who have invested their lives in family and you look at the heartbreaks that are there--children and grandchildren who have broken the hearts of parents and grandparents; husbands and wives who have broken one another's hearts and estrangement from parents. There are all manner of problems with family.

You know, we worship family today. So many people seek a release from materialistic culture by making family a god in our own day. They get married and think that marriage is going to be the place where they find ultimate satisfaction. Then suddenly, you find out that she recognizes all your weaknesses, and you're not as nice as her dad, and it's hard work, and it's rough going. Suddenly, the thing that was going to provide you satisfaction is the source of your greatest heartbreak. That's what Solomon is saying. Family, children, grandchildren, as great a blessing as these can be, are not the source of satisfaction.

I'm not making light of those things by any stretch. Enjoying family, marital relationships, children, and grandchildren is one of the great blessings of life when received from God. My son has choked me up a couple of times over the last month. He keeps going through the same routine; he's done it about four times as I've been dressing him. I'll be dressing him at the bed and he'll say, "My name is Jennings Ligon Duncan the fourth." And I'll say, "Jennings, yes it is." And he'll say, "And *your* name is Jennings Ligon Duncan the third." And I'll say, "You are right, Jennings." And he'll say, "What's your daddy's name?" And I'll say, "Jennings, my daddy's name was Jennings Ligon Duncan, Jr." And then he says, "Where *is* your daddy?" And I have to say, "Well Jennings, my daddy's in heaven." And then he always says, "Well, I want to meet him." And I have to say, "Well, Jennings, one day you will meet him." He also asks me, "Hey, did you grow up in heaven?" And I have to say, "No, I didn't grow up in heaven, Jennings. My daddy died and he went to heaven and one day you'll get to meet him." And it chokes me up to think about the fact that my father hasn't had the privilege of enjoying his grandchildren. He would have loved to have bounced Sara Kennedy and Jennings on his knee, but the Lord did not allow for that. I'm not making fun or light of bouncing grandchildren on your knee, but that is not the ultimate source of satisfaction. It can be some of the great heartbreaks of life we can experience, precisely from things that could be blessings when received from God. Solomon is not just being pessimistic. He's saying if wealth is the place that you're seeking true satisfaction, and if family is the place that you're seeking true satisfaction, then you are in for a deep, deep disappointment.

Then he speaks of long life, doesn't he? Long life fails to satisfy. He speaks of living a thousand years twice. That's sounds like a reach, doesn't it? It's sort of Methuselah twice. He's saying that if you live twice the age of Methuselah, it wouldn't give you happiness. People never seem to learn from the experience of previous generations. They continue to look on wealth as the road to satisfaction. They continue to think that family will provide them all the meaning that they've ever wanted or need. They think that long life will bring happiness, and their hopes are always disappointed because there is nothing, apart from God, that can fill us and satisfy us. Until we learn to trust and follow God, our lives will be unsatisfying and we will hopelessly careen from one thing until the next until we end up buried on some lowly hill or under some tree. God has not built us for life to satisfy us apart from Him.

II. Our work can't provide ultimate satisfaction.

He goes on in verses 7-9 and gives us another thing that can't satisfy us. Our work can't satisfy us and provide ultimate satisfaction. He's looked at wealth, family, long life, and now he examines work. Our labors in this life can't satisfy our mouths much less our souls, he says. "All man's labor is for his mouth," he says, "and yet the appetite is not satisfied." Our work, our labor fails to satisfy our temporal needs much less our deepest needs. And what our work produces cannot be the ultimate source of satisfaction whether temporal or eternal. Again, the satisfaction comes only from the Maker. He is the one who enables us to enjoy the fruit of our labors.

Somebody may be out there and say, "Ah, what we really need to do is get back to the simple life. If so many things weren't the big draw and if we could just enjoy less things, that would be better." There is sort of that romantic notion out there, and if you've read Voltaire and *Candide*, that is kind of the idea. Let's give up the rat race of Enlightenment and let's get back to the simple farming of the ground with our hands and enjoying those simple things. Let's get back to life's simple pleasures. Well, Solomon blows that apart. He says, "Do you think the poor man has a handle on this better than the rich?" His point is that ultimate satisfaction, apart from God, is not in the simple life either. Getting back to the simple life is not the answer because our labor, no matter how humble it might be, cannot provide us ultimate satisfaction.

III. Our words can't fix this reality.

He goes on, if you look at verses 10-12 to speak again about words and wisdom and philosophy. He says in verses 10-12 that our words can't fix this reality. We can't talk and explain and philosophize our way out of this mess. "Whatever exists has already been named. Their many words which increase futility," he says in verse 11. He's saying that words and philosophy and wisdom and reflection fail to satisfy, fail to bring meaning. In fact, words increase futility. God has made us for Himself and our hearts are restless until we rest in Him.

We keep looking for that rest anywhere and everywhere else--wealth, family, long life, the simple life, philosophy. But God has not made us to find rest in those things. So we have songs that we sing that speak about that search for a rest that we can't find. You are sitting there listening to *The Man of La Mancha* and "The Impossible Dream." You kind of get goose bumps when you hear old Don Quixote singing about the unreachable star. Why? Part of it is that we inherently know that quest for something that is beyond the things that can be provided for us in this life in which ultimate satisfaction resides. Or, at a pop culture level, you could be listening to Bono and U2 singing "I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For." Everybody knows that quest because God has made us

to seek for ultimate satisfaction, but He has also made us so that our ultimate satisfaction can only be found in Him.

What we need is something that will be adequate for every day, that will be life long, and not merely passing, which can cope with the inherent futility of this earthly realm and the brevity of life. What we need cannot be found here, however. It cannot be found under the sun; it can only be found in God under heaven, the Preacher would say.

What about you? Where is your satisfaction found today? Is it in going to the right school? Joining the right sorority and fraternity? Marrying the right person and settling in the right neighborhood and living the right kind of life? Is it in the abundance of wealth? Is it in social status? Is it in having the perfect family? Is it living a long and blessed life? Is it bouncing your own grandchildren on your knee and seeing them married to the right kind of people? Or is it in God? Is it just in God and Him alone? Have you known the depth of satisfaction in Him in the deepest heartbreaks of your life?

There are people here this morning whose lives have been shattered just in the last week. Their lives have been rocked. Family situations, disease, illness, sickness, the loss of loved ones, the change of careers—turns that they never could have anticipated. Do you, in the midst of those things, know deep contentment and satisfaction and meaning and even blessedness in Him? You can. There are many here who do and they don't find those things from the things that they have, but from the God in whom they have everything. You find Him only through faith and trust in Jesus Christ. Grant, O God, that we would trust and rest in You today. Let's pray.

Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, to Him be the glory in the Church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen.

A Guide to the Morning Service

The Call to Worship

All our worship services begin with a scriptural “call to worship” (that is, the content of the “call” comes from God's own word quoted and pronounced by the minister). In this “call” we are reminded that God always takes the initiative. He always comes toward His people first, in grace. Our worship is a reflexive and deliberate response to His gracious call. This is how it is in the Bible. Biblical worship is always our response to God's revelation.

The Hymn of Praise – Great Is Thy Faithfulness

Our opening hymn usually focuses on the adoration of the Triune God, praising Him for who He is and what He does. And so it does today. This song is a well-known and loved twentieth-century hymn. All of the hymns today will focus upon God Himself, even as the passage we study comments upon how miserable life is without Him.

The Prayer of Adoration and Invocation

The opening prayer of the service always focused upon the praise, exaltation, and adoration of our great God, and “invokes” (thus “invocation”) His presence and communion with us as we come to worship Him.

The New Testament Reading

Paul told Timothy “give attention to the public reading of Scripture” (1 Timothy 4:13) and so, at virtually every morning service, a minister reads a substantial section of Scripture. In the reading of God's word, He speaks most directly to His people. We are reading through the book of Acts at present.

The Hymn of Response – Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise

This hymn is based, in part, on 1 Timothy 1:17 (“Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.”) and Psalm 104:2 (“He [God] wraps himself in light as with a garment....”).

The Morning Prayer and 23rd Psalm

At the end of the morning pastoral prayer today, we will recite the beloved Twenty-third Psalm. This psalm is among the first things children memorize in our Sunday School, and so even our youngest will be able to join in this scriptural acknowledgment of who God is and what He has done for us. If you have forgotten this beloved passage or need to refresh your memory, please note that the text of the version we will say together today (in the beautiful and still well-known King James Version) is found in the inside cover of your Pew Bibles.

The Hymn – Be Thou My Vision

This ancient Celtic hymn text expresses the desire of a Christian to live a God-centered existence: for the Lord to be what we see, our constant mental preoccupation, our ever-present companion, our wisdom, our true Father, our protector, our delight, our only inheritance, first in our heart.

The Sermon

Our approach to preaching at First Presbyterian is to read, explain, and apply

Scripture as we work consecutively through books of the Bible. We are currently studying through Ecclesiastes on Sunday mornings. Tapes of all sermons are available for check-out or purchase in the Church Library or Bookstore. See also <www.fpcjackson.org>.

The Hymn of Response – How Great Thou Art (stanza 1)

From the bleakness of Ecclesiastes 6, we turn in joy to God. This gospel song, made famous in the various Billy Graham Crusades, is a favorite of many in our congregation. We sing it this morning as our closing expression of praise. Its first stanza contemplates the greatness of God as displayed in His creation.

The Benediction

As God has the first word in worship, so He has the last, and so all of our services conclude with the minister pronouncing the Lord's benediction upon His people, using a scriptural word of blessing. Benediction simply means “blessing.”

This guide to worship is written by the minister and provided to the congregation and our visitors in order (1) to assist them in their worship by explaining why we do what we do in worship and (2) to provide them background on the various elements of the service.

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